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John Paul Mitchell spends two to three hours a day on social media sites, sharing links to articles he finds interesting and regularly engaging people in bursts of 140 characters or less.

But the time he spends on his Twitter account, Facebook page and other sites is more than just leisure. Mitchell hopes it will help deliver him the Arizona governorship in 2010.

"I'm a political outsider, so any way that I keep an open dialogue with voters is going to help me," Mitchell, who is running as an independent, said from behind his laptop [computer](#) in a north Phoenix coffeeshop.

Some missives from his Twitter account, aznextgov, offer takes on issues of global import: "The world carbon tax is coming and so is the world government to regulate it. Your US Sovereignty will be obsolete. Be forewarned!"

Others are nothing more than personal musings: "I'm taking my dogs to the local dog park. Might play a few rounds of tennis too."

His sites carry dozens of messages discussing issues and political philosophy with followers and friends.

And that's the key, Mitchell said: connecting with people. In his case, that's almost 2,000 who follow his Twitter posts and nearly 1,800 Facebook friends.

"Social media lets me listen to what voters have to say and gets my campaign's message out there in a way that wasn't possible before," Mitchell said.

Strategic use of social media helped propel Barack Obama to the presidency, and as the 2010 elections approach many Arizona politicians are using Twitter, Facebook and other sites to interact with the public.

Attorney General Terry Goddard (Twitter: TerryGoddardAZ), a Democrat who is considering a run for governor, told his followers recently: "I will be at the Domestic Violence Walk. Will you?"

As Chuck-Gray on Twitter, state Sen. Chuck Gray, R-Mesa, the Senate majority leader, promotes what he calls his "very conservative" views: "We pushed back Acorn. We have other fronts in this battle for freedom. We must win them too. Never give up, for we R on the side of freedom," he shared recently.

Serena Carpenter (Twitter: drcarp), an assistant professor of online and broadcast media at Arizona State University, said there's no doubt that direct, instant and unfiltered communication between politicians and the public via social media will become increasingly important.

"A lot of people have communicated the same way for decades, so it might take more than just a couple years," Carpenter said. "But five years from now, I doubt we'll see politicians who don't use social media."

So far, she said, some Arizona politicians are doing better than others at maximizing social media's potential.

"One big mistake people make with social media is using it to just shovel content," Carpenter said. "They forget sometimes about the word social' in social media."

Sen. Ron Gould, R-Lake Havasu City, said he prefers Twitter (SenatorRonGould) because it lets him [communicate](#) instantly with the public. But Gould said he avoids posting just any passing thought.

"Back when the Legislature was in session, it was a good way to keep people informed or let them know what I was thinking," Gould said. "I do try to refrain from telling people when I'm clipping my toenails. I don't think people want to hear about my bodily hygiene."

Rep. Anna Tovar, D-Tolleson, said she prefers Facebook, a social-networking platform originally developed for college students. Tovar, who describes herself as tech-savvy, said Facebook makes having a conversation easy.

"Sometimes I ask people for input on an issue, and they're generally very responsive there," Tovar said. "In general, I have an open-door policy, and it's the same on Facebook. It opens the dialogue."

U.S. Rep. Harry Mitchell, D-Ariz., uses Twitter ([HarryEMitchell](#)), Facebook and [YouTube](#) to communicate with the public, sometimes with help from his staff, said Adam Bozzi, a spokesman.

"Congressman Mitchell responds to every letter, call and e-mail, but online we find there's a great conversation that develops," Bozzi said. "And his Facebook has both people who agree and disagree."

Republican David Schweikert (Twitter: [DavidSchweikert](#)), who lost to Mitchell in 2008 and is running for the seat again, said he enjoys the instant, unfiltered nature of social media but notes that it requires diligence.

"When I first ran for office - at 26 - an election was a one-day sale," he said. "Now every day is election day."

There are downsides to social media, however. More than other users, politicians have to be on alert for objectionable comments by visitors, Schweikert said.

John Paul Mitchell, the independent candidate for governor, made news in May when a political blogger found a photo of a female roommate topless in the tub on his account with Flickr, a photo-sharing site. He removed the photo, saying the roommate, who shared access to the site, posted it without his knowledge.

"Well, I'm a lot more careful. I have to be," Mitchell said of the incident. "But I think people appreciated the way I handled it."

And easy access to social media can enable anonymous pranksters. For example, someone established a Twitter account pretending to be Ron Gould, offering tweets lampooning his conservative [outlook](#). After Gould contacted Twitter, the account changed to NOTRonGould and added a note labeling it as parody.

"You can only make fun of my moustache for so long until it gets old," Gould said. "I would say one out of every 10 is funny."